

## **“PAVING THE ROAD TO RECONCILIATION”** **(Genesis 43:15-34)**

Today I want to talk to you about paving the road to reconciliation. The dictionary defines reconciliation as the restoration of friendly relations between people or groups that have been in conflict. Reconciliation is greatly needed in a world that’s deeply divided and polarized, even among families and close friends. Restoring friendly relations is difficult – whether the conflict is minor or major – it’s not easy to know how to go about it – and it’s helpful to learn from the example of a real-life story.

We’ve been studying the life of Joseph and today we’re in chapter 43 of Genesis, which is part of a longer story stretching from chapter 42-45. These chapters revolve around three meetings Joseph had with his brothers, and today we’re going to look at the second meeting. Throughout these meetings two themes run side-by-side – one is the process of repentance by the brothers and the other is the process of forgiveness by Joseph. Repentance and forgiveness are both essential for the restoration of relationships, not only in our horizontal relationships with people, but in our vertical relationship with God – and in this passage we get to see a real-life picture of how this happens.

In the big picture of the Bible, the reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers is an important key in God’s plan to save the world. The twelve sons of Jacob will become the twelve tribes of Israel, and through them God will bring forth the Messiah. But their family is fractured. Twenty years earlier Joseph’s ten older brothers – acting out of jealousy – grabbed Joseph, threw him in a pit, left him there to die, and then sat down and casually ate dinner. They feel nothing but animosity towards their brother. They decide, however, instead of killing him, to sell him into slavery to a caravan of traders heading down to Egypt.

Joseph’s life is suddenly turned upside-down. He’s betrayed and abandoned by his brothers, he’s separated from his father and younger brother Benjamin, and he becomes a slave in a foreign country. Adding to this injustice, he’s thrown into prison for a crime he didn’t commit. But God was working behind the scenes to lift Joseph out of prison and into the palace of Pharaoh where he becomes the second-in-command of the entire nation.

He’s put in charge of the famine relief program, storing up grain during seven years of abundance to use once the seven years of famine hit. People from all over the world come to Joseph for food, including his brothers. Joseph recognizes them, but they don’t recognize him. Joseph could have taken revenge right then and there in any way he saw fit, but instead he puts them through a series of tests to see if they’ve changed – can I trust these guys or are they the same old deceitful, carnal, worldly lot that did me wrong?

As we pick up the story today, we’re going to see two essential elements that pave the road to reconciliation, and the first is **an awareness of wrongdoing on the part of the offender**. Verses 15-18 says... “So the men took the gifts and double the amount of silver, and Benjamin also. They hurried down to Egypt and presented themselves to Joseph. When Joseph saw Benjamin

with them, he said to the steward of his house, ‘Take these men to my house, slaughter an animal and prepare a meal; they are to eat with me at noon.’ The man did as Joseph told him and took the men to Joseph’s house. Now the men were frightened when they were taken to his house. They thought, ‘We were brought here because of the silver that was put back into our sacks the first time. He wants to attack us and overpower us and seize us as slaves and take our donkeys.’”

Reconciliation begins with an admission of wrong, and for twenty years Joseph’s brothers had buried the memory of what they did to Joseph – they did not talk about it – they didn’t think about it – and if they felt any guilt, they kept it stuffed deep inside. They may have forgotten, but God hadn’t, and God He uses their meetings with Joseph – who they think is an Egyptian ruler – He uses all this to awaken their consciences.

In chapter 42 Joseph accuses them of being spies and they insist they’re not – “We’re part of a large family from Canaan, and all we want to do is buy food.” Joseph says, “You’ll prove to me you’re not spies by going back home, getting your younger brother Benjamin, and bringing him to me – and to make sure you do, I’m keeping Simeon as a hostage. Bring Benjamin, you get Simeon back.”

There’s nothing like stress and pressure to get your attention. The brothers know that their father will never let them take Benjamin – and if they don’t bring Benjamin, it’s all over for their family. Simeon will likely die, and since they won’t be able to purchase food, they’re families will likely die. The stress of the situation awakens their guilty consciences... “We’re being punished for what we did to Joseph – this is karma.” Things get even worse when they each find money in their sacks of grain. They don’t know that Joseph put it there out of kindness, and fear that they’ll be accused of stealing. These brothers are a hard-hearted crew, and the harder the heart the more pressure God must apply to bring them to repentance.

They manage to talk their father into letting them take Benjamin back to Egypt, and head out. They take with them the money left in their sacks, as well some gifts to get on the good side of the Egyptian ruler. As they arrive, for the first time since Joseph was 17, he sees his brother Benjamin, who was just a toddler when Joseph was sold as a slave. Joseph shared a special bond with Benjamin in that they both were born to Rachel, Jacob’s favorite wife.

Seeing that all his brother’s are present, Joseph tells his steward to prepare a noontime meal. At this point, the brothers are jumpy about everything, and they take this meal as an omen of their doom. They say, “He’s going to think we’re thieves because of the money found in our sacks, and he’s going to throw us into prison or make us slaves.”

Verses 19-22 says... “So they went up to Joseph’s steward and spoke to him at the entrance to the house. ‘We beg your pardon, our lord,’ they said, ‘we came down here the first time to buy food. But at the place where we stopped for the night we opened our sacks and each of us found his silver—the exact weight—in the mouth of his sack. So we have brought it back with us. We have also brought additional silver with us to buy food. We don’t know who put our silver in our sacks.’”

No one accused them of stealing money, but they still feel guilty. They're not guilty of stealing money, but they know in their hearts they're guilty of plenty of other things – not the least of which is what they did to Joseph. They explain to Joseph's steward about the money in their sacks and beg for mercy. The irony, of course, is that when Joseph begged for mercy from the bottom of his pit, they didn't care. Now the shoe is on the other foot. Will they receive mercy?

For any reconciliation to take place, there must be repentance on the part of the offender. In some cases – like this one – there is a clearly an offender and clearly an offended. In some relationship conflicts, there is a degree of blame on both parties, requiring repentance by both. But what exactly does it mean to repent? The Greek word – *metanoia* – means to make a change in the way you think, feel, and behave. True repentance engages your mind, emotions, and will. The first step in repentance is to change your mind and admit you've done wrong. That's not easy. When confronted with wrongdoing, our natural response is to defend, deflect, and deny. We immediately put up a wall, deny the accusation, and try to deflect the problem back on the other person. We usually have an explanation to minimize any blame on our part. Genuine repentance acknowledges that what you did is wrong and takes full responsibility for your actions.

But there's more to repentance than changing your mind – it also involves a change of emotions. When I know that my actions have caused you pain, there will a feeling of remorse and sorrow – I will feel the effects of what I have done. If I don't in some way feel the weight of the wrong, then I've not really repented. Empathizing with what the other person has felt from my wrongdoing is a sign that I “get it.” Real repentance is both an admission that what I did was truly wrong, and a deep sense of regret about what I've done.

But that's not all – real repentance also means a change of behavior. It's not enough to say, “I know I messed up and I'm sorry about it.” It also involves the intention to change and not do the same thing again. As John the Baptist said, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance,” and the fruit of repentance is a change in behavior.

Repentance is not only necessary for restoring our relationships with people, but also our relationship with God. The first step in being saved is acknowledging that you're a sinner separated from a holy God. The trouble many people have is that they're not terribly bothered by their sin. They admit that they're not perfect, but don't have a sense of how deadly serious sin really is. They don't sense any need to be saved from anything, and therefore don't see their need for a Savior. Reconciliation with God begins with an awareness that you're estranged from Him, and you say to Him, “I know I'm a sinner whose fallen short of your righteous standards, and I need your grace.”

Being saved not only means you change your mind about your sin, but you have a change of heart. There must be a deep, emotional conviction of sin, where you say as the Apostle Paul did, “I am the chief of sinners. There is no good that dwelleth in me. Lord God, I cry out to you for mercy.” And then, by God's grace, you change your course of life and produce fruit in keeping with repentance. Joseph's brothers are coming closer and closer to repentance.

The second element of reconciliation we learn from Joseph's story is **an attitude of grace on the part of the offended**. Grace is showing love and kindness to someone who has done nothing to deserve it. These brothers have done nothing to receive grace, and Joseph – the offended party – is in a prime position to exact revenge on his offenders in any way he chooses – he can have his brother's executed, he can have them tortured, or he can make them slaves – just as they turned him over to be a slave. But as the story continues, Joseph shows remarkable grace to his brothers in several ways.

First, we see it in the kindness of Joseph's steward in 23a... "It's all right," he said. 'Don't be afraid. Your God, the God of your father, has given you treasure in your sacks; I received your silver.'" The blood pressure of the brothers drops considerably when Joseph's steward greets them warmly and assures them that they are not guilty of stealing money. "In fact," he says, "Your God put the money in your sacks. Take it as a gift from Him." At this point they have no idea who put the money in their sacks or why.

Next, verse 23b says... "Then he brought Simeon out to them." They breath another sigh of relief when Simeon is released, meaning the Egyptian ruler kept his end of the bargain. Then verse 24 says... "The steward took the men into Joseph's house, gave them water to wash their feet and provided fodder for their donkeys." To their amazement, they're not being treated like prisoners, but as honored guests.

But they're still unsure how the Egyptian ruler will treat them. Verses 25-26... "They prepared their gifts for Joseph's arrival at noon, because they had heard that they were to eat there. When Joseph came home, they presented to him the gifts they had brought into the house, and they bowed down before him to the ground." They want to do everything possible to show goodwill to their host, and brings gifts to show their respect. And for the second time, they bow before Joseph, fulfilling the dream he had as a teenager many years before.

Joseph uses the opportunity to inquire about his father. 27-28... "He asked them how they were, and then he said, 'How is your aged father you told me about? Is he still living?' They replied, 'Your servant our father is still alive and well.' And they bowed down, prostrating themselves before him." They're doing everything they can to stay on his good side.

Then Joseph sees Benjamin. Verses 29-30... "As he looked about and saw his brother Benjamin, his own mother's son, he asked, 'Is this your youngest brother, the one you told me about?' And he said, 'God be gracious to you, my son.' Deeply moved at the sight of his brother, Joseph hurried out and looked for a place to weep. He went into his private room and wept there."

Joseph had seen Benjamin from a distance earlier in the day, but now he stands only a few feet from him. Joseph was 16 years older than Benjamin, his only full brother, who was only about a year old the last time Joseph saw him. As he looks Benjamin, all the hurt, all the loneliness, all the lost years he could have had with his family, all the missed birthdays and anniversaries, catch up with him. He manages to say, "God be gracious to you," and then hurries out of the room. Once he's alone, all of his emotions come flooding out.

Once he gains his composure, Joseph treats his guests to a great feast. Verses 31-34... “After he had washed his face, he came out and, controlling himself, said, ‘Serve the food.’ They served him by himself, the brothers by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, for that is detestable to Egyptians. The men had been seated before him in the order of their ages, from the firstborn to the youngest; and they looked at each other in astonishment. When portions were served to them from Joseph’s table, Benjamin’s portion was five times as much as anyone else’s. So they feasted and drank freely with him.”

The brothers still don’t know what their fate is, but they’re amazed that this high-ranking ruler is treating them so well. Certain customs were observed during the meal – Joseph, being the master, sits at a table by himself, and nearby the brothers eat at their own table. The Egyptian servants sit at yet another table, not wanting to defile themselves by eating with Hebrews. All the time they’re no doubt wondering why on earth Joseph would invite these rough, hairy-looking foreigners to eat in his home.

The brothers are even more amazed when the ruler seats them the order of their ages – from youngest to oldest. One mathematician estimated that there were nearly 40 million different orders in which the eleven brothers could be seated. Keep in mind that they have absolutely no idea that this is Joseph, and must have been spooked that he knew so much about them.

When the food is served, Joseph piles it on Benjamin’s plate – which was a test to see how the brothers would react. Jealousy over Joseph being chosen as the favorite son is what motivated the brothers to betray him – now that Joseph shows favoritism to Benjamin, how will they react? Have they changed, or have they have they simply transferred their hatred to Benjamin? Joseph carefully watches their body language, but they convey no signs of jealousy. Instead, it says, they feasted and drank freely. They expected the worst, but received nothing but grace and kindness.

What separates Christianity from other religions is grace – instead of earning our way into God’s good graces and doing something to contribute to our salvation – Ephesians 2 says we are saved by grace through faith. Salvation is a free gift of God’s grace that we simply receive by faith. Just as Joseph’s brothers we’re completely at the mercy of Joseph, we are completely at the mercy of God. The good news is that God wants a relationship with us and gladly offers it to us if we put our faith in Christ.

Once you receive the grace and mercy of God, you have the supernaturally ability and obligation to show love and grace to those who have sinned against you. They don’t necessarily deserve it, but neither did you deserve God’s grace.

When someone wrongs you, conventional wisdom says you wrong them back – or at least shun them. Joseph was as wronged as anybody can imagine, but he did not allow a seed of bitterness to grow within him. He didn’t turn a blind eye to what his brother’s did, but he released any vengeful feelings to the Lord and left it up to Him to repay.

What's so remarkable about Joseph's grace is that he had the power to take vengeance, yet he didn't – and God calls all of us who have received the grace of God – whom we have wronged – to show grace to those who have wronged us.

Joseph was the living embodiment of the Apostle Paul's words in Romans 12:17-21... “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Joseph could have repaid evil with evil, but he didn't. He had the power to take revenge on his brothers, but he left vengeance up to God. Instead of retaliating, instead of harboring ill feelings, he feed his brothers and gave them drink – he opened up his home and treated them as honored guests. In doing so, he heaped burning coals on their heads, that refers to the ancient custom of a repentant person carrying a pan of burning coals on their head as a sign of shame and remorse. The idea is that showing kindness to the person who wronged you will cause them to feel shame and turn from their sin.

Reconciliation requires both repentance and forgiveness. In the case of Joseph's brothers, repentance took twenty years and a whole lot of pressure hard-knocks along the way. In the case of Joseph, he forgave his brothers – but as we'll see next week, he took time to reestablish trust with them.

This brings us to you and me. In your vertical relationship with God, have you acknowledged your sins to Him and accepted His free gift of grace in Christ? If the Holy Spirit of God is convicting you of sin, listen to Him and repent. Trust Christ as your Savior and ask God to forgive you.

In your horizontal relationships with others, is there anyone God is bringing to your mind that you need to go to and say... “I was wrong, please forgive me?” Perhaps God is convicting you of your need to forgive someone who has wronged you. No one was hurt deeper than Joseph and Jesus, but they released their offenders to God, by through the grace given to them by God, displayed the same grace to their enemies.

Sometimes we need a real-life story to show us how reconciliation works – and I want to pray that God's Word – that is alive and active, and sharper than a two-edged sword, will penetrate the thoughts and attitudes of our heart.